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What COVID-19 revealed about gender equality policy framing.¹

Abstract

COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on many areas of inequality. Despite its public commitment to gender equality, Australia's Morrison government has been accused of implementing economic stimulus policies in response to the pandemic that are often 'gender blind' and disadvantage women. This article examines both the Morrison government's gender equality policies and key criticisms of its economic measures. It argues that the government's claimed 'gender blindness' results not so much from an opposition to gender equality policy as from a particular neoliberal framing of it.

Keywords: gender equality, women, COVID-19, neoliberalism, policy framing.

Introduction

COVID-19 has been described as 'the great revealer' of inequality (Corak 2020).

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres (2020) argues that: 'COVID-19 has been likened to an X-ray internationally, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of

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the societies we have built'. This article focuses on what the pandemic has revealed about federal government gender equality policies in Australia and their influence on how the government addressed the gendered impacts of COVID. The IMF (Georgieva et al. 2020) warned that COVID-19 could undermine years of work on gender equality, arguing that: 'It is crucial that policymakers adopt measures to limit the scarring effects of the pandemic on women.' Similarly, Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins (in Tuohy 2020) noted that COVID had 'highlighted in razor sharp focus how gender inequality can be amplified in a crisis situation'. She added that: 'This is laying the groundwork for some pretty serious poverty for women in the future if you piece it all together.'

Yet, despite its public commitment to gender equality, this article will cover the views of a range of critics, from academic commentators and representatives of think tanks and NGOs to political opponents, who argue that the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia has revealed deficiencies in the Morrison government's policies that have increased Australian women's vulnerability in a time of pandemic. This article analyses the government's gender equality policies along with key economic policies introduced to counter the pandemic's impact such as JobKeeper and the 2020-21 Budget measures. A major emphasis is placed on analysing policy framing by key Liberal Party politicians given that the National Party of Australia is both the junior partner in the Coalition and its ministers had less relevant portfolios. Based on an analysis of government policies, it will be argued that the Liberal framing of gender equality issues was influenced by broader neoliberal economic policy conceptions that then shaped how the government addressed the gender inequality impacts of COVID. There is a long history of Australian feminist policy analysis that emphasises the negative impact of conventional economic thinking on issues of gender equality, indeed this has been an issue since the

early days of so-called ‘second wave’ feminism’s engagement with the Australian state (see e.g. Dowse 1983 ; Sharp and Broomhill 1988; Sawer 1990). This article adds to that broader literature by focusing on the Morrison government’s policy framing and analysing the implications for gender equality policy in the context of the pandemic.

While the Morrison government’s approach reveals elements of gender blindness that initially seem similar to those exhibited by previous governments that were more hostile to feminism, it will be argued here that the current forms of government gender blindness arise not from a denial of gender inequality *per se* but rather from a particular neoliberal framing of it. The focus here will be on the Liberals given that they were in office during the pandemic. However, it should be noted that neoliberalism also influenced some past Labor government policies, albeit to a lesser extent (Harris Rimmer and Sawer, 2016; Johnson 2019b, 61-69). Labor has been less influenced by neoliberalism in Opposition (Johnson 2019b, 69-71).

The use of framing analysis

This article draws on feminist scholarship which emphasises the importance of policy framing. Ryan and Gamson (2006, 13) explain that a ‘frame is a thought organizer, highlighting certain events and facts as important and rendering others invisible.’ Consequently, Bacchi (1999, 207) and Lombardo et al. (2009) point out that gender framing has major implications for outcomes as particular discursive constructions of policy issues influence conceptions of where the solutions lie. Gender equality itself can be framed in multiple ways, including in ones which privilege market-oriented objectives, despite these often being gender blind and potentially having negative implications for many women (Lombardo et al. 2009, 6).

Yet, such market-oriented neoliberal perspectives increasingly influenced concepts of gender equality from the late twentieth century on, despite neoliberalism having long been criticised by feminist economists for resulting in unequal gender outcomes (Agenjo-Calderón and Gálvez-Muñoz 2019). Neoliberal policy frameworks in Australia privileged free markets, deregulation and self-reliance over government intervention and emphasised individual choice over conceptions of gendered social disadvantage (Sawer 2007, 20). The policy implications for women ranged from funding cuts to established women's services to an increased gendered caring role for women as they stepped in to look after family members as government services reduced. Meanwhile, labour market deregulation left many female-dominated industries particularly vulnerable. Crucially, the influence of market-driven perspectives also led to a reduction in explicitly designated policy machinery for women, undermining a previous understanding that general policy settings were rarely gender-neutral and therefore required specialist feminist-influenced oversight and advice (Sawer 2007, 20-21; Harris Rimmer and Sawer 2016).

In short, framing analysis, such as the one to be undertaken in this article, can help us to understand not only how policies are shaped but also how the constraints of that framing influence policy outcomes. While this article focuses on the pandemic period, the analysis briefly outlines key policy frames underlying government statements and policies relevant to gender equality from the period of the Abbott government (2013) on. Relevant primary sources analysed include politicians' statements justifying and explaining policy positions and key policy documents such as budget papers. A wide range of policy issues relevant to women were analysed in order to identify assumptions, interpretations and 'thought organisers' underlying the policies and the associated policy frames. Policy issues examined ranged from economic

stimulus measures, and economic related measures such as education, training and employment, welfare and superannuation to specific gender equality measures, including domestic violence policy. Neoliberal economic frameworks, of the type described above, were identified as still being a dominant influence across policy areas.

This article argues that the government's pandemic response was strongly influenced by that prior neoliberal policy framing. A major government economic framing assumption is that markets are not only gender-neutral but that they can and will drive greater gender equality. The government therefore tends to remain confident that their general economic measures will automatically benefit women — a confidence that can both reduce the need for in-depth gender analyses and downplay alternative conceptions of women's structural economic disadvantage. A neoliberal emphasis on individualism, and related downplaying of structural economic disadvantage, also intersects with the government's distrust of so-called 'identity politics'. In other words, the article both identifies the key framing influencing Morrison government gender equality policies and uses an analysis of that framing to better understand those policies.

The analysis will begin with a discussion of the gender equality policies of the Morrison government's immediate predecessors' and their influence on the Morrison's government's initial policies before proceeding to analysing the government's policy measures after the pandemic struck.

The Morrison Government

The Morrison government (2018-) came into office in circumstances that seemed unpropitious for gender equality policy. Morrison's predecessor as Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull (2015-18), was a moderate rather than socially conservative Liberal. By contrast, Morrison is a Pentecostal Christian who has exhibited socially conservative

beliefs on issues ranging from abortion to same-sex marriage (*Hansard* 2011; *SBS News* 2019). Morrison's (2021b) belief in God-given individual characteristics has reinforced his opposition to so-called 'identity politics'. Furthermore, following Turnbull's removal, various Liberal women MPs (e.g. Banks 2018; Bishop 2018; Reynolds in *Hansard* 2018a; O'Dwyer 2018d), including some who had carefully avoided identifying as feminist, suggested that the Liberal party had major gender equality issues. Morrison (2019) responded by going into damage control, affirming his government's ongoing commitment to gender equality and proclaiming that seven women members constituted 'the highest number ever in any Australian Cabinet'.

Neoliberal framing: Choice, aspiration and a business case for gender equality

An examination of key policies reveals that the previous Abbott and Turnbull governments' gender equality policies were significantly influenced by the free market, neoliberal framing discussed above (Harris Rimmer and Sawer 2016, 753-54; Johnson 2019a, 202-209). Both governments focused on encouraging individual choice and aspiration while making a business case for equality of opportunity. As Abbott's Minister assisting the Prime Minister for Women, Michaelia Cash (2014) stated: 'We are... firm believers in the ability of industry...to recognise the strong business case for more diverse leadership, and to take the initiative to create cultural change within their workplaces.'

Such perspectives continued under Morrison with Turnbull's Minister for Women, Kelly O'Dwyer, retaining her position. Shortly after Morrison became Prime Minister, O'Dwyer summarised successive Coalition governments' achievements and

commitments, while acknowledging women's continuing inequality in areas ranging from graduate pay to women's underrepresentation in STEM and older women's poor financial position. O'Dwyer (2018a) emphasised the government's role in creating jobs for women while highlighting that the gender pay gap had 'reduced to a record low of 14.5 per cent from 17.2 per cent under the previous Labor government'. Although, O'Dwyer didn't mention that Labor's poor figures reflected the high wages paid in predominantly male jobs during the mining boom (McCutchan 2018). O'Dwyer emphasised that over half of all participants in the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme were women (O'Dwyer 2018a) and pledged \$3.6 million government funding for a new Future Female Entrepreneurs program (O'Dwyer and Frydenberg 2018b).

Free market approaches to pay equity issues

Given neoliberal policy framing influences, much of the government's policy focus was on encouraging private business, entrepreneurship and aspiration and equality of opportunity over equality of outcomes. There was significantly less support for lower paid women wage workers. O'Dwyer (2018e) did announce increased funding for monitoring of the gender pay gap. However, given the Coalition's opposition to government intervention and belief in market solutions to gender equality, she implied that lower female wages arose because of an oversight, rather than from any endemic discrimination or from employers' financial advantage in paying women less. O'Dwyer (2018c) claimed that 'there are some workplaces that don't fully understand that there is in fact a gender pay gap. When they have that information they can take action.'

O'Dwyer (2018c) rejected calls for tougher regulatory oversight of employers' gender pay inequities, either along the lines advocated by Labor or by the British Conservative

Government, stating that ‘we’re not going to be punitive here. We want to work together with employers....’

Indeed, the Abbott government (2013-15) had previously prevented the implementation of Labor government measures which strengthened business equal pay reporting requirements (Abetz and Cash 2015). The Abbott government also opposed a comparable work equal pay claim for childcare workers, following a successful case under Labor’s Fair Work Act (2009) that increased pay equity for some social and community services sector workers, citing concerns over flow-on effects for other industries (Hannan and Karvalas 2014). O’Dwyer also dismissed concerns regarding the high number of women working in casual jobs. She denied that pay and conditions were generally poor for casual workers and emphasised individual choice, arguing that many chose to stay casual and ‘it’s important to give people flexibility.... in the way that they manage their lives’ (O’Dwyer 2018f). The Morrison government retained Coalition support for non-interventionist pay equity measures despite evidence of a decline in employers taking action to improve pay equity and the total remuneration gap still being 20.1 per cent (WGEA 2020b).

Self-reliance and financial resilience

Despite downplaying women’s overrepresentation in low paid, precarious work, the Government emphasised encouraging women’s financial resilience, arguing that self-reliance and independence would increase women’s ‘options and choices’(O’Dwyer in Murphy 2018) .Indeed, building individual ‘financial security’ was seen as the key to enabling women ‘to live the best life they can live’ and being able to seize ‘the opportunities open to them’ (O’Dwyer in Murphy 2018). The government’s Women’s Economic Security Statement measures, including a focus on entrepreneurship and

facilitating women moving from welfare dependency to work, aimed to encourage empowerment and increase choice on ‘our ongoing journey... to gender equality’ (O’Dwyer 2018b). In short, the government’s conception of gender equality reflected a neoliberal emphasis on self-reliance and individual choice (Sawer 2007, 20) that was then incorporated into ongoing Coalition government policy

Gendered care responsibilities

However, O’Dwyer did suggest that a lack of workplace flexibility for men to take on caring responsibilities influenced the life choices women made and contributed to the gender pay gap (O’Dwyer and Frydenberg 2018a). When O’Dwyer (Hansard 2019) resigned before the 2019 election, she thanked her husband for his childcare assistance. Yet, O’Dwyer’s commitment to men sharing such work was greater than some of her colleagues. Prime Minister Morrison and Treasurer Frydenberg left the day to day practical tasks of responsibility for their young children predominantly to their wives to manage (Crabb, 2019, 3-5). As we shall see later in this article, and despite O’Dwyer’s comments, the Coalition government was frequently to neglect the gender equality implications of women’s caring work.

The impact of the Pandemic on Women

For all the social and economic reasons discussed above, Australian women were already in a vulnerable position when the pandemic hit. However, key elements of the government’s policy discussed above, including a confidence in positive market outcomes, a focus on individual choice and self-reliance, the lack of remediation for low

paid, precarious female work and a lack of focus on (predominantly) women's caring responsibilities for children, were to influence the Morrison government's response to the impact of COVID-19 on Australian women.

While female-dominated industries such as nursing and aged care were at the forefront of combatting the virus, other high areas of female employment were amongst those most affected. As one report concluded regarding the 2020 impacts:

Women's jobs were hit harder than men's during the COVID lockdowns. At the peak in April, almost 8 per cent of Australian women had lost their jobs, and women's total hours worked were down 12 per cent. The figures for men were 4 per cent and 7 per cent (Wood et al. 2021, 3).

Even those women who recovered work potentially suffered long-term economic "scarring" that could impact future career progression, the gender wage gap and retirement income (Wood et al. 2020, 24-29). Furthermore, 60 per cent of new jobs created from May 2020 were casual and women were employed in 62 per cent of those jobs (Centre for Future Work 2021, 11). Women's workforce participation also decreased as a result of lockdowns and restrictions, exacerbated by increased gendered caring responsibilities such as women caring for children prevented from going to school, resulting in women reducing or leaving paid work, as well as job losses (Pennington 2021, 2). The 2021 COVID outbreaks had similar effects. ABS figures showed women's participation rate dropped more than men's and more women than men worked zero hours (ABS 2021b; ABS 2021a). From May-August 2021 women's employment dropped 90,000, men's by 25,000 (Borland 2021). Further figures, related to the dates specific government statements were made, will be given later in this article.

Meanwhile, women's caring role in the home increased substantially, especially during initial periods of childcare and school shutdowns. ABS (2020b) figures stated that 46 per cent of women compared with 17 per cent of men stayed at home to look

after children full-time by themselves due to COVID. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg (2020b) seemed to assume that women would be primarily responsible for home-schooling when he referred to the pressure ‘on young women who are trying to home school their kids’ thereby also arguably revealing the neoliberal-influenced tendency to neglect the private caring work that underpins the public economy.

Government economic and social policies for tackling the pandemic

Morrison (2020d) acknowledged that COVID had a ‘disproportionate impact on women’ because of the pandemic’s effects on female-dominated areas of employment such as accommodation, hospitality and retail. Similarly, Treasurer Frydenberg (2020d) acknowledged that ‘women have experienced higher job losses than men’.

Nonetheless, it will be argued below that the government’s existing gender equality policies had not been designed to address such impacts given the neoliberal ideological framing identified above. The government’s focus on market-led solutions to gender inequality was particularly unsuited to cope with a situation in which a pandemic, and government restrictions on business designed to address it, undermined normal market functioning and severely constrained opportunities for choice and aspiration.

Meanwhile, the government’s belief that market mechanisms would facilitate gender equality contributed to a view that eventually removing government restrictions would be largely sufficient to facilitate gender equality. As we have seen, the federal government’s policies had also downplayed issues of women’s low pay and precarious work in highly impacted sectors such as accommodation, hospitality and retail.

Frydenberg (2020e) stated that the world was facing ‘the most severe global economic crisis since the Great Depression’ and that ‘in the space of just one month, more than

one million Australians lost their jobs or saw their working hours reduced to zero’ (Frydenberg 2020e). Consequently, the government introduced a suite of pandemic economic measures during 2020. Key initial measures to be discussed here include JobKeeper, a wage subsidy scheme designed to retain workers’ relationship with their employer; HomeBuilder, a subsidy scheme for the construction industry and JobMaker, a business hiring credit scheme. As they massively increased government debt to stimulate the economy, Morrison (2020b) and Frydenberg (2020c) declared that ideology had been set aside to defeat the virus. Nonetheless, as we shall see, the government hadn’t substantially reworked its ideological framing of gender issues.

Labor and other critics to be discussed below argued that government policy not only failed to address many issues women were facing but sometimes added to their problems. (The Greens also mounted substantial criticisms but this article particularly focuses on analysing Labor critiques as the alternative party of government). It is to an analysis of what those criticisms reveal about alternative framings of gender inequality policy, largely based around conceptions of women’s structural disadvantage (see further Wong 2021), that the discussion will now turn.

Gender and Employment

Labor politicians argued that the government’s JobKeeper eligibility requirements (ATO 2020) excluded many women in low-paid, precarious work who had been employed for less than twelve months. Labor Senator Pratt noted that ‘the majority of the casuals excluded from JobKeeper are women, including more than 200,000 women in retail and fast food alone.’ (Hansard 2020b) In addition to initial Bankwest data (Cassells and Duncan 2020a, 1) cited by Pratt, subsequent research (Cassells and

Duncan 2020b, 1) pointed out that JobKeeper's length of employment requirements could also discriminate against parents re-entering the workforce, thereby disproportionately excluding women. Some industries with high female employment levels were also effectively excluded from JobKeeper, such as local government and universities (Batchelor 2020, 5).

Critics to be discussed below argued that the 2020 budget was really about men's jobs rather than jobs *per se*, thereby revealing gender biases in conceptions of the economy that are common in traditional economic thought, including neoliberalism (Becchio 2019, 1-15, 182-216). The government's *Home Builder* (Australian Government 2020) package focused on funding jobs in construction, despite critics arguing that funding in female dominated areas such as education, health, accommodation and food services would generate far greater employment (Richardson and Denniss 2020, 9). Quiggin (2020) argued that the government's focus 'on the kinds of workers (mostly men) who wear hard hats and hi-vis clothing' supported industries with a declining share of the workforce while neglecting the jobs most impacted by COVID. In 2018-19, 87.9 per cent of workers in construction were male and 85.1 per cent of technicians and trades workers while women made up 78.2 per cent of workers in health care and social assistance and 71.9 per cent of workers in education and training (ABS 2019). In Wood et al's (2020) words, 'this budget overlooks the hard hit in favour of the hard hat'. Furthermore, the high earnings growth in the Construction industry subsequently contributed to a rise in the Gender Pay Gap to 14.2 per cent for full-time employees (WGEA 2021). Labor critics argued that the government's Home Builder package excluded social housing, yet '62 per cent of tenants in social and public housing are women. We know that more women require social housing' (Gallagher in *Hansard* 2020c). Other experts (NFAW 2020) pointed out that the tax concessions and

cuts designed to stimulate economic growth (in line with neoliberal principles) would disproportionately benefit male-dominated industries and higher paid, predominantly male, taxpayers. Furthermore, the government's JobMaker business hiring credit scheme excluded the older unemployed, of which women made up the majority (NFAW 2020), and risked older women being replaced by younger (possibly male) workers. Overall, Labor Leader, Anthony Albanese (2020), argued that: 'Women have suffered most during the pandemic, but are reduced to a footnote.'

The new Minister for Women, Marise Payne (*Hansard* 2020a) responded to such criticisms by reiterating claims that the government was improving the job prospects of both men and women and had a better record on workforce participation and pay equity than Labor. Senator Seselja (*Hansard* 2020d) accused Labor of attacking government policy solely because there were 'a lot of men who work in construction'. Senator Brockman argued in June 2020 (*Hansard* 2020e) that women's jobs were already recovering.

....women in the workforce were impacted very, very hard by the crisis....
But does the Labor Party ever raise the fact that the latest ABS stats also show that jobs for women recovered at 1.4 per cent whereas jobs for men only recovered at 0.4 per cent. Do you ever talk about the identity politics of that? Of course you don't, because it doesn't fit into your narrative. It doesn't fit into this politics of identity that you are seeking to continually drive (*Hansard* 2020f).

Brockman's point about identity politics will be returned to later. Labor's Clare O'Neil (2020) has also stressed the importance of recognising areas of male employment that have been detrimentally impacted. However, Brockman's figures overlooked that the female participation rate had dropped by 2.9 versus 1.9 per cent for men (ABS 2020e). Using *percentage* figures concealed that more women work part-time and had lost 224,500 jobs compared with 149,300 for men (Richardson and Denniss 2020, 2-3). More women than men worked zero hours (ABS 2020d; WGEA

2020a). While female hours increased (ABS 2020a) compared with male hours in June 2020, the ABS (2020a) cautioned that: ‘Hours worked for females were still around 7.3 per cent below March, compared to 6.5 per cent for males,’ given previous bigger falls in hours for women (ABS 2020c). In May 2020, women’s underemployment was 14.1 per cent as opposed to men’s underemployment of 12.2 per cent (National Skills Commission 2020, 18). The situation for women was even worse in states such as Victoria, with women also less likely to have paid leave entitlements (Batchelor 2020, 2; Equity Economics 2020, 1).

In short, women’s employment was still in crisis. Nonetheless, in May 2020, Prime Minister Scott Morrison (2020a) also seemed confident women’s jobs would bounce back once the pandemic was over, reflecting the Coalition’s pre-existing framing of the market as not just gender neutral but as actively facilitating gender equality

where we were most successful going into the pandemic in our economy was with job creation for women in the workforce... what we are seeing in our workforce it is often and usually women who are getting the bigger share of those new jobs.

Meanwhile Minister for Industrial Relations Christian Porter (*Hansard* 2020i), drew on neoliberal-influenced critiques of allegedly excessive regulations to argue that new jobs for women could be generated in hard hit areas such as accommodation and food services by revising awards.

Above all, Morrison (*Hansard* 2020j) asserted that women would benefit from the 2020 Budget measures since they also ran small businesses, drove cars and wanted to study science and technology. Like Ley and Brockman, he denounced criticisms as divisive.

This is about a Budget of bringing all Australians together in the national interest, to get us through. And there will be voices that will try and set young people against older people, women against men, jobs in one sector versus

jobs in another sector - they are the voices of division that will undermine the future economic prosperity of all Australians. (Morrison 2020c)

Such comments also reflected the government's underlying economic framework in which structural disadvantage was downplayed and the market largely constructed as positive for gender equality. The government continued quoting figures suggesting that women's employment had already recovered better than male employment (Andrews 2020). Yet, in addition to contrary figures already given above, a month after the October 2020-21 Budget, the official unemployment rate for women was 7.1 per cent and 6.5 per cent for men (Nahum and Stanford 2020, 18). In November 2020, 15.2 per cent of women in the labour force were either unemployed or underemployed compared to 11.7 per cent of men (Jericho 2020).

Furthermore, government responses failed to address the ongoing gender inequality in precarious employment which the pandemic had highlighted. While the government subsequently introduced legislation (Hansard 2020k) that aimed to address issues of conversion from casual to permanent work, it mainly addressed a court judgment that could have seen employers paying misclassified casuals an estimated \$39 billion bill (Karp 2020). Women casual workers weren't specifically mentioned in the Industrial Relations Minister's second reading speech (Porter in *Hansard* 2020k). Unions argued that the bill would take away essential rights and contribute to additional workers being classified as casual (Karp 2020).

By contrast, other lessons revealed by the pandemic, such as the need to build up technical skills and sovereign capability in the (male dominated) field of manufacturing, were explicitly addressed in the Budget (Frydenberg 2020a). The government's sovereign capability measures did not include ones designed to favour companies with good gender equity outcomes. Karen Andrews (2020), the Minister for Industry, Science and Technology, argued women would benefit from technical training and

other general budget measures, while reiterating that: ‘We are not going to set up a contest between men and women - we are here for all Australians.’ A neoliberal emphasis on choice was evident, with Andrews (2020) arguing that the low number of women in STEM was due to the study choices that young girls made and pledging budget support for a mere 500 female cadetships. Meanwhile, the government’s measures to cut costs in some science and technology university courses, while increasing costs in the female-dominated humanities and social sciences, particularly penalised women (Grannaway and Dunn 2020).

Childcare and women’s employment

The government initially provided significant support for childcare to encourage parents (particularly women) to keep working. Yet Labor Senator Katy Gallagher (*Hansard* 2020c) pointed out that the female dominated Childcare industry was the first industry to have JobKeeper removed. An estimated 94.2 per cent of child educators are women (WGEA 2020a, 4). Sussan Ley MP (*Hansard* 2020h) responded by arguing that the government had previously provided significant financial support for childcare. Indeed, childcare had briefly been free (David 2020). Ley also argued that Labor members were critical because of their own ideological framing:

And, yes, we support our educators for the early learning that they deliver.... The most important thing we can do is keep the centres open.... But that's not what you hear from the opposition, because what you hear from the opposition is this long, ongoing, bleak, dreary narrative about entrenched disadvantage. And, you know, it's just so last century. I see the opportunities for women in the modern world, and coming out of this pandemic, as giving families and communities something that adds to their choices (*Hansard* 2020h).

Senator Brockman (*Hansard* 2020f) had made a similar point in his critique of Labor’s so-called ‘identity’ politics. Yet such critiques reflected the government’s discursive

policy framing that has been discussed previously and meant that many Liberal politicians did not see a need to acknowledge and address gendered structural disadvantage. Similarly, the major confidence in market outcomes and the failure to take critiques of their own policies on board suggested that the government's policies would not include major measures addressing the gender inequality that COVID had so tellingly revealed.

Women's economic security

The government's economic policy response still reflected a neoliberal focus on financial self-reliance and individual capability. A government scheme allowed up to two payments of \$10,000 to be withdrawn from personal superannuation during the pandemic crisis, despite women's low superannuation levels (Hodgson 2020). Labor MP Julie Collins (*Hansard* 2020g) noted 'that women already retire with half the superannuation balances of men' and yet 'Treasury did no modelling on the impact based on gender prior to this decision'. Jane Hume (2020), Assistant Minister for Superannuation, Financial Services and Financial Technology, was criticised for suggesting that women's lack of capability due to poor financial literacy was a major factor in their poor retirement income outcomes, rather than the impact of workplace discrimination and caring responsibilities on women's careers and wages. Furthermore, women had a higher rate of financial and budget management skills on issues other than long-term investment strategies (Ziwica 2020). The influence of the Coalition's prior emphasis on women's individual capability and economic self-reliance was therefore still evident, including in the downplaying of structural social and economic factors on women's retirement incomes.

Domestic violence

The Morrison government received a much more favourable response to its domestic violence measures. The government announced \$150 million additional funding for domestic violence services in March 2020, acknowledging that lockdowns could confine women to the very homes in which they were in danger (Morrison et al. 2020). This was subsequently to be increased to \$1.1 billion for women's safety measures in the 2021-2 Budget (Payne et al. 2021, 2). Harris Rimmer and Sawer (2016, 753-54) have suggested that neoliberal governments find it easier to commit to countering domestic violence than some other gender equality measures because it doesn't involve forms of economic redistribution. Their argument helps explain the government's previous support for the Fair Work commission's decision to only provide five days *unpaid* domestic violence leave rather than the ten days of *paid* leave requested by the ACTU (O'Dwyer 2018f; Hansard 2018b), although there were subsequent suggestions that might be reconsidered (Payne et al. 2021, 17). Countering domestic violence is also compatible with conservative ideas that it is the traditional role of men to protect women.

The government has subsequently committed to developing a new National Plan for ending violence against women and children that will draw on input from the 2021 National Summit on Women's Safety and address multiple forms of inequality (Ruston and Payne 2021). However, while Patty Kinnersly, the CEO of Our Watch, the leading Australian organisation for preventing violence against women and children, declared herself 'hopeful' for positive government action following the summit, she also emphasised that a broader change in government policy to empower women was necessary. Kinnersly asked whether the government would 'apply a gendered lens to

their policies to make sure that they're not accidentally disadvantaging women? Do they take a greater leadership role on gender equality, workplace sexual assault, the pay gap?' (cited in Hall 2021). Notably, while the government has introduced welcome changes in some areas of sexual harassment legislation, it has not yet agreed to (more market interventionist) recommendations to place a positive onus on employers to prevent sexual harassment and discrimination (Hamann 2021).

Accusations of gender-blindness and the government's new gender 'lens'

Kinnersly's reference to 'a gendered lens' reflects a common accusation that many of the Morrison government's broader policies have been gender-blind. Feminist commentators (Sharp et al. 2020) had predicted that the 2020-21 budget would not adequately address the needs of women, highlighting the Abbott government's abolition of gender impact budget statements. Such statements had provided detailed assessments of the gender impact of general government budget measures based on an understanding of the different social and economic position of men and women. The required departmental gender assessments of proposed policies often resulted in improved policy outcomes (Sharp et al. 2020). As we have seen, the 2020-21 Budget did indeed face widespread criticism for its failure to recognise and address gender disadvantage. The Per Capita thinktank (2020) tweeted that 'the \$240 million commitment to women is 0.038 per cent of the total budget deficit. A third of one per cent. That's not a gender lens, it's not even a microscope'.

However, the government continued to reject such criticisms. Crabb (2020) reported that the Prime Minister's department had contacted one commentator who had

criticised gender inequities in the budget in order to assert that ‘nothing in the budget is gendered.’ Another commentator responded forcefully:

As for the claim that nothing in the budget was gendered – that’s the point. Proudly declaring that no gender analysis was done on the budget reveals a disturbing ignorance of the inherent bias in our economic system...A budget that treats everyone equally, ignoring the fact that women start from a place of significant disadvantage on almost every meaningful economic measure, simply entrenches gender inequality and, in light of the disproportionate impact of the current recession on women, actually risks sending us backwards (Dawson 2020).

Furthermore, while some women did undoubtedly benefit from the government’s general measures, the 2020-21 Budget still revealed the same neoliberal economic features in the government’s framing of gender equality policy that have already been identified in this article.

Accusations of gender blindness have a point given the government’s failure to apply a prior gender lens to budget proposals. Gender equality has not been a high priority for the Morrison government. Government policies, and conceptions of the economic, have often favoured areas of employment that were male dominated (while frequently suggesting such domination resulted from women’s choices). However, this was not the same as the gender blindness of old. For example, during the Howard Coalition government (1996-2007) neoliberal economics was combined with an active opposition to feminism. A focus on the family tended to replace explicit mention of women’s inequality, feminist calls for gender equality were constructed as discriminating against stay-at-home mothers and feminists were depicted as just another self-serving, elite, ‘special interest’ (Sawer 2007; Johnson 2000, 70-87). Howard (2003) rarely endorsed the ‘equality of men and women,’ except in the context of critiquing radical Islamist views on gender. By contrast, the Morrison government’s form of gender blindness arose not from an active opposition to gender equality policies but from a particular form of them.

A new gender lens?

While this article has primarily focused on the government's immediate 2020 response to the pandemic, later developments have not suggested that the government has fundamentally changed its approach. In response to various scandals over the treatment of women, ranging from an alleged rape of a Liberal woman staffer in parliament house to continuing accusations of sexism by women politicians, Morrison (2021a) subsequently announced a raft of female ministerial changes designed to bring 'a fresh lens, in particular to achieving the outcomes, the results that we all want for Australian women across the country'. It apparently took women's issues being partly reframed as a political problem due to declining women's support in the polls (Martin 2021) for the Prime Minister to change his tone on the issue of a gender 'lens'.

While remaining critical of some policies, several feminist commentators (NFAW 2021) subsequently welcomed funding increases in areas such as childcare, anti-domestic violence measures and women's health (that totalled around \$3.4 billion in the 2021-22 budget if the \$1.7 billion for childcare is included). However, the newly resurrected *Women's Budget Statement* tended to list funded policies it was claimed would benefit women, rather than providing a detailed analysis of the gendered impact of all measures in the budget, as such *Statements* were originally designed to do (Sharp et al. 2020).

In short, the government's increased funding for perceived women's issues in the 2021-2 Budget was still not accompanied by a fundamental shift in regard to market interventions. For example, although the *Statement* mentioned that women's work was frequently undervalued (Payne et al. 2021, 36), the government did not reconsider its

previous opposition to more interventionist measures in regard to equal pay. Similarly, the government's measures addressing a Royal Commission-identified crisis in Aged Care potentially potentially facilitated more employment in a female dominated industry but without addressing improving the associated low pay and poor conditions (Clun 2021). While more casuals denied the abolished JobKeeper were eligible for the temporary COVID disaster payment, a reduction in JobSeeker benefits saw many women pushed back into poverty (Bessell 2021). The government is not addressing the many forms of workforce gender inequality that became even more evident during the pandemic (Foley and Cooper 2021). Measures designed to enable single parents to take out mortgages to purchase homes (Frydenberg 2021), were still based on neoliberal conceptions privileging private property ownership rather than investing in social housing and could result in women taking on unaffordable debt. In short, while the government has been prepared to spend more money, partly to address an electoral problem, the 2021-2 Budget does not reveal a fundamental reconsideration of the issues raised by the previous policies analysed here.

Conclusion

As pointed out previously, there is a long history of policies on gender equality in Australia (as elsewhere) being constrained and shaped by the economic orthodoxies and frameworks of the day, albeit not usually in the context of a global pandemic. This article is contributing to the broader literature on that topic by analysing the relevant policies of the Morrison government during COVID-19. The Morrison government's gender equality policies have centred around (market-driven) individualism, aspiration and choice. The government opposed being too interventionist in the market, including by addressing the low paid and precarious nature of the work of many women. It was a

framing of gender equality policy that was arguably not best suited to addressing a situation in which a pandemic, and the government's resulting health measures, suppressed the market, aspiration and choice and in which economically vulnerable women in low paid, precarious work were often those most impacted. Consequently, COVID-19 highlighted forms of gender inequality that existing government policy frameworks were ill-equipped to address. By contrast, and despite its own chequered history, the Labor Opposition advocated differently framed policies that were constructed around conceptions of women's structural disadvantage. While the government rethought other ideological frameworks, such as its attitude to deficits, it did not rethink its framing of gender equality policy. COVID-19 may have been a 'great revealer' of gender inequality in Australia but it has not been a great transformer of government policies designed to address it.

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